

U.S. Department of the Interior
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
California/Nevada Operations Office
Sacramento, California

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
Grasslands Wildlife Management Area Proposed Expansion
San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Merced County, California

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed the *Environmental Assessment for the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area Proposed Expansion*. The Environmental Assessment describes the Service's proposal, the affected environment, and evaluates three alternatives (including a no action alternative) to determine the effects associated with expanding the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The Land Protection Plan and Conceptual Management Plan describe and provide information on land acquisition priorities and management programs for potential implementation within the proposed WMA expansion area.

The Service proposes to expand the WMA to conserve, protect, and restore seasonal wetlands, native grasslands, vernal pools, riparian corridors and wildlife compatible croplands through the purchase of perpetual conservation easements. It is the intent of the Service to maintain currently existing agricultural practices that support resident and migratory wildlife.

The Service analyzed three alternatives, including the No Action Alternative (Alternative 1), in the Environmental Assessment. Alternative 1 does not support the conservation and recovery goals of the Service, its numerous partners, and conservation organizations. Under Alternative 1, farmers would not be provided with an incentive to grow wildlife friendly crops. Conversion to other, less wildlife-compatible uses could become financially appealing, thus, increasing the likelihood of further habitat fragmentation and the loss of wildlife-friendly crops upon which several species of migratory birds have become dependent, such as geese and cranes. Tens of thousands of these birds use harvested grain fields, pasture, and other wildlife-friendly agricultural areas. Under Alternative 1, protection of waterfowl, cranes, shorebirds, and listed and sensitive species would not be assured unless natural habitats, wildlife-compatible croplands, and the rural landscape are protected from conversion to non-wildlife compatible crops, such as orchards, vineyards, poultry farms, and dairies, or urban development. For these reasons, the Service has not selected Alternative 1 for implementation.

Under Alternative 2, the Service would seek habitat protection through conservation easements on approximately 13,800 acres (for specific parcels included see the Land Protection Plan, Appendix A, Table 1). With the protection of additional native grasslands and vernal pool habitat, the Service would also be contributing to protection and recovery of migratory waterfowl populations, shorebirds and landbirds of North America's Pacific Flyway, and federally listed threatened and endangered species.

Although Alternative 2 is designed to protect native habitats and the species dependent upon them within the expanded Grasslands WMA, by not incorporating a large block of land the foremost effect of habitat fragmentation is likely to occur, which is the loss of connectivity of biological processes and components. The isolation of native habitats can disrupt the interacting functional components of the larger system. Under Alternative 2, the riparian habitats connecting these parcels would not be protected nor managed for maximum wildlife benefits. Without this riparian habitat, one of the purposes for the action, to “establish a protective corridor across a portion of California’s Central Valley” would not be effectively achieved. For these reasons, the Service has not selected Alternative 1 for implementation.

Alternative 3 includes lands identified in Alternatives 2, with the addition of 32,600 acres including wildlife compatible croplands, pasture lands, and local creeks and sloughs for a total, proposed WMA expansion of approximately 46,400 acres. These additional lands would increase protection to vernal pools and native grasslands by connecting the large blocks of grasslands and vernal pools included in Alternative 2, and maintain a contiguous corridor for wildlife movement across the study area. Lands with creeks and sloughs have been included in this alternative, and opportunities for riparian restorations are expected to become available. Farming with wildlife compatible crops would be supported under this alternative resulting in a more effective habitat conservation program when compared to Alternative 1 (No Action) and Alternative 2. The Service has selected Alternative 3 for implementation as the most appropriate for the protection and benefit of natural resources.

Lands within the project area could be protected through perpetual conservation easements at the maximum level considered and would assist in achievement of recovery goals for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, and federally listed threatened and endangered wildlife species which occur within the study area. As with Alternative 2, lands would not become part of the WMA or National Wildlife Refuge System upon establishment of the new WMA project boundary, but rather at such time that the Service purchased an interest in the property on a willing seller basis.

As described in detail in the Environmental Assessment, the Service is attempting to preserve this region in its current state. The Service believes it is important to create a program that compensates the agricultural community and those landowners who manage their lands for the benefit of wildlife resources and the public, so this heritage can be perpetually protected for future generations. Because the Service is attempting to preserve the area as it exists, the social and economic effects are relatively minor. For the same reasons, the environmental effects are mainly neutral or beneficial in preserving the existing habitat values.

Based upon my review and evaluation of the information contained in the supporting references, I have determined that the action of expanding the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area by approximately 46,400 acres is not a major Federal action that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment within the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended. Accordingly, the Service is not required to prepare an environmental impact statement.

Manager
California/Nevada Operations Office

Date

References

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. January 2005. *Grasslands Wildlife Management Area Proposed Expansion, Final Environmental Assessment, Land Protection Plan and Conceptual Management Plan.*